

HANDSPUN FLAX SOME NOTES AND EXPERIENCES - FAQ

Spinning flax is something that has been done for centuries. There are many facts, stories, myths to accompany this endeavor. We all like to think of growing the fibers on our property, harvesting and processing that fiber, and making clothing and other household textiles. While this was sometimes the case, processing flax – all the way back to the Nile Delta where our stricks originate, has been more of a community endeavor than an individual one. At all stages of the process, people performed various steps to a crop that had had been sown and tended by others, each person taking the fiber a step or two further toward the creation of fabrics to be used for daily needs.

A hackled strick of flax has grown to maturity, been harvested, dried, rippled (seeds removed), retted, dried, then broken, scutched and finally hackled. Hackling the scutched material into individual bundles (stricks) still requires some hand steps – the commercial machinery available makes a continuous roving that will later feed into industrial mills and machine powered spinning heads. A well prepared strick is something to revere considering the long road it has traveled.

The strick is then opened and prepared for spinning by arranging the long fibers on a distaff of some sort to keep the fiber from tangling.

FAQ:

Which Distaff?:

My experience has been that a conical distaff is the easiest to dress and the spinning proceeds easily. Birdcage distaffs look pretty, but it is more difficult to arrange the fibers so they form their structure outside the ribs. For those who do not have a distaff attached to a spinning wheel, free standing distaffs are easy to make. Put a broomstick (make sure the length gives you comfortable access to the cone) in a Christmas tree stand. Place the cone of a conical distaff over the top of the broomstick.

How Do I Choose A Spinning Wheel?:

Since linen fibers are very long, a spinner wants to use a wheel with moderate speed. My personal favorite is the older Ashford Traditional shown in this document on p. ?.

Can I Use Sizing?:

Traditionally, the enzymes in spit were judged to make excellent yarn. However, it tastes terrible. I have observed that commercial linen thread seems to be sized to keep it really smooth, so I started using a small “glug” of StaFlo laundry starch in my spinning water. The yarn produced with this liquid turns out really well.

Which direction for twist?

It is really what you wish to make. After researching many sources, the decision to spin S or Z usually depends on the type of spinning equipment used in the locality and which direction is most common and easy to do. There are as many examples of S as there are Z.

What size yarn am I making?

To calculate the grist of your handspun linen, use a niddy noddy or skein winder with a circumference that is known. Then count the rounds in your skein. Multiply the rounds by the circumference for total yardage. Weigh the skein on an electronic scale. Divide the yardage by the number of ounces for the yards per ounce. Now multiply by 16 for the yards per pound. For the “lea” count, divide yards per pound by 300. For Nm or metric numbering, calculate how many meters are in a kilogram and divide by 1000.

Is my yarn ready to use?

YES. Linen singles spun without overtwist are ready to use once dry. Traditionally weavers used the natural singles to make fabric. The fabric was then bleached when desired. It is also possible to bleach yarn prior to weaving, but it will weaken the yarn somewhat.

Do I need to ply my yarn?

Only if you wish a plied yarn in appearance and wearing qualities. Linen singles are preferred for weaving. If the yarn is to be knitted, or used in crochet or macrame, plying may be desirable. The decision to ply will depend on the end use.

Linen yarn looks like packing twine and is not at all exciting. What is needed yet?

Natural linen yarn, spun to an even grist, not too much twist, and wound into a skein is not an exciting yarn. Only after it has been made into an object and that object “finished” will the beauty of linen emerge.

Whether woven, knit or prepared in some other technique, the linen object will need at least a wet finishing. In the case of woven goods, the fabric will need a full washing in hot water and a hard press or mangling when still damp. Some fabrics are even beaten with a mallet (beetling) to pound the woven structure into its finished form.



Handspun Linen Singles



Freshly Woven Linen Fabric



Fabric washed and mangled

Here is a detail from my first handspun item, a tablecloth with a 2-ply commercial warp, in a twill, 30 epi and handspun weft. The weft was woven natural (I may have boiled it in soap prior to a light honey color) and bleached this white in use. The building pictured is where the loom stood. The table setting was our celebration for taking it off the loom with our best dishes, cake from a lovely bakery and fresh coffee.



TRADITIONAL HANDSPUN FLAX – “Bauernlein” or Farmhouse Linen

I was fortunate to learn to spin flax living in Europe, where handspun flax skeins and balls are frequently on display in local museums. Nicely spun, it varies greatly in color and grist. There is quite a bit of latitude on what can be judged as nicely spun linen yarn.

The photos that follow are from a visit to Lily Weisgerber-Peters in Luxembourg some years ago and represent a collection of handspun skeins given to her by people who know she prizes it. At the time of the visit she was using these varied skeins as weft on a striped warp for a plain weave tablecloth. The sett was not over 28 epi.





What a treasure to have so many variations to choose from and utilize in various woven fabrics.

Last summer I finally went out on the terrace and followed the tradition I learned in:
On the right is a lady in lower Saxony, in front of the stove in a blueprint apron spinning flax.



On the left, here I am, and the apron is real, purchased from a print maker in Pulsnitz while on a trip to Germany.



I have always loved the photos of women spinning flax – while it is not the most pleasant fiber to spin, the spinner usually has a look of peaceful enjoyment – which, with a bit of practice, isn't hard to duplicate.

Start slowly and carefully – the linen yarn you spin will be a treasure.

The three fabrics below are from a book of photos showing a wide range of linen fabrics. The page refers to "Bauernlein" – and it shows that these examples, especially the two on the right are a little bit rough around the edges – as one would expect.



This photo is from a book of photos of linen fabrics and is "Bauernlein" the fabrics woven of the handspun linen of yesteryear. It is not what is touted here in the US - we always have to pretend we're better than the rest of the world and need only the "very best". 1. is a "Überhandtuch" the towel that covered the ones you used 2. is a patterned weave 3. is just plain old plain weave - farmhouse style.